Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 06-50-230
Week of December 11, 2006

FALL AND WINTER CATTLE WATERING ISSUES

Cattle producers are being urged to keep an eye on their water resources this winter.

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food Livestock Development Specialist Bob Klemmer said weather conditions over the course of the spring and summer have impacted the quality of surface water sources.

The cause can be broken down into two main factors: too much water, and not enough. Klemmer said, while both situations can result in poor water quality and reduced cattle productivity, the prognosis for improvement is much better for the former.

"Flooding and run-off has led to increased nutrient loading in dugouts, dams, sloughs and lakes in some parts of Saskatchewan last summer. Combined with our hot summer weather, this situation resulted in rapid and recurrent algae blooms," said Klemmer.

Treatment during the summer takes care of this growth, but leaves behind the dead organic material, which ends up decaying on the bottom over the winter months as the water becomes anaerobic.

This nutrient loading also encourages the growth of water weeds, which adds to the build-up of organic matter on the bottom. Left unchecked, this scenario leads to brackish/odorous water in mid-winter due to the anaerobic break-down of the accumulated organic matter. If bad enough, cattle may not drink as much, which will result in a reduction of feed intake and lower productivity (lower gains, weight loss, lower milk production). Fortunately, this situation can be remedied by the installation of a properly sized aeration system.

On the other hand, Klemmer said a lack of surface water can impact water quality as well.

"There are parts of Saskatchewan that experienced very little snow and zero run-off, and therefore no recharge to surface watering sites. Adding insult to injury, the hot, dry and windy weather last summer increased the amount of water cattle required, and caused a much higher evaporation rate, which has led to very low surface water reserves in some areas," said Klemmer.

The resulting issues range from uncertainty of water supply/quality, to bringing old wells with questionable water quality back on-stream. In some cases, this has forced producers to haul water to the cattle. Hauling water is expensive, time consuming and unsustainable; however, because the quality of the water may actually be higher, the cattle may be better off than drinking water from a depleted slough, dugout or dam.

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As water evaporates off the surface of these water bodies, minerals dissolved in the water remain, and, over time, may accumulate to levels of significance to cattle productivity and health. Even in a year of normal rainfall, one study demonstrated that mineral concentration in a dugout can double. This should be a "red flag" to those in this situation to make sure they test for water quality, especially when water levels fluctuate.

Klemmer said knowing your water quality is the first step in ensuring your herd remains productive and healthy.

"The main minerals of concern are iron (Fe), sodium (Na), magnesium (Mg) and sulphur (S) in the form of sulphates. While iron levels are a nuisance for household use, and can cause problems inside your water distribution system, it is only when iron becomes excessive that it can affect the amount of water cattle will drink and, thereby, reduce productivity," explained Klemmer.

Sodium and magnesium are most often of concern when they are associated with high levels of sulphates. High levels of magnesium sulphate have been shown to reduce water intake by cattle. If the water your cattle are fed contains high levels of sulphates, many problems can show up over time.

Cattle on high sulphate water tend to have loose stools, due to its laxative effect. While this, in itself, is not a production problem, it may be an early sign that something is up—so check that water. Concerns with sulphates and productivity and health relate to interference in the absorption of trace minerals from the diet (primarily copper, zinc, and manganese) and, in extreme cases, cattle death due to polioencephalomalacia (thiamine deficiency).

Solutions to these water quality problems range from installing costly water treatment systems, to initiating a special mineral supplementation program, to re-development of your water source over time.

The levels of minerals in surface water can fluctuate widely over time, depending on precipitation, recharge, cattle use and evaporation, and the concerns/solutions can also be long-term, depending on these same environmental factors. Consequently, Klemmer said, a good first step to ensuring your cattle remain healthy and productive is testing the quality of water from all of your water sources.

"Testing and then monitoring quality over time is very important. Solutions to water quality problems, such as aeration, can be simple and inexpensive or costly and complex, such as treatment systems. Resources for determining your needs are available through your local PFRA office. When treatment is not practical and specialized nutritional supplementation is necessary, resources for determining your needs are available through Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food," said Klemmer.

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SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLE TOPIC COMING TO LIGHT

Change can be an uncomfortable aspect of life and business to address, especially when talking about one's family livelihood. That's why Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) regional offices, along with several community and industry partners, created the new "Power of Change" courses and workshops being piloted across Saskatchewan in 2007.

Don Perrault, an SAF Agri-Business Development Specialist in Prince Albert, has been watching the trend toward change in agriculture and its related industries rise to a fever pitch.

"Rapid change, the likes of which we've seldom seen, is occurring in agriculture right now," said Perrault. "And that puts producers under a lot of economic distress, from weather-related and global pressures on pricing, to the high cost of fertilizer and fuels. It's all impacting farmers and adding to financial pressures."

Perrault helped to develop the new "Power of Change" courses, along with colleague Brenda Stefanson in the North Battleford Regional Office. The hope is that producers will take the course and be able to see the positives in possibly changing their course.

"What we sense is farmers struggling with change," said Stefanson. "We recognize that change is not easy to deal with, and some people may have negative feelings about it."

The courses are designed to help participants learn about their own attitudes and beliefs, as well as offering techniques to cope with, take on, and feel good about the process of change. Four pilot sessions are being offered in early 2007 in the North Battleford, Prince Albert, Yorkton and Outlook regions.

The course is divided into three sections: a Power of Change course, developed by the Pacific Institute of Training; a session on Exploring the Opportunities; and One-on-One Consultation with Specialists – your chance to discuss programs, agencies and ideas to help carry the farm into the future.

Perrault said Saskatchewan producers who feel they need to change but aren't sure how to go about it should take part, particularly those who may be at a crossroads in their farm finances or succession planning.

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"We're asking farmers to express their interest, and we'll set dates and times from there," said Stefanson. "The locations are flexible, and we'll be asking the groups we get where the best place is for them to meet."

If you would like to participate in one of the pilot "Power of Change" courses, call your SAF regional office at North Battleford (306) 446-7964, Outlook (306) 867-5575, Prince Albert (306) 953-2363 or Yorkton (306) 786-1531 directly to register. Each course location will be limited to a small number of registrants in order to provide one-to-one counselling and business planning services. Interested participants are encouraged to sign up for the course as early as possible. The registration deadline is December 31, 2006. Stefanson advises telephoning to register your interest. The cost to attend the course is $430 per person, and it is a Canadian Agricultural Skills Service (CASS) approved course.

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NEW OAT VARIETY COULD OPEN NEW MARKETS

A new oat variety holds the promise of opening up new markets and opportunities for Saskatchewan producers.

The oat variety, called CDC SO – I (Crop Development Centre Super Oat #1), has a nutritional profile similar to barley.

Brian Rossnagel, an oat and barley breeder at the University of Saskatchewan's Crop Development Centre, led the effort by the CDC Oat Research and Development team, and said its properties open up a wide range of new opportunities.

"The uniqueness of this particular oat variety is that it combines a more digestible hull with a higher fat content than regular varieties. What that gives us is a whole oat grain that has a feeding value for ruminants (like cattle) that is essentially equal to barley," said Rossnagel.

That provides a number of advantages to both grain producers and the feeding industry, as oats are relatively less expensive to produce in Western Canada than barley.

However, Rossnagel said this variety also has potential to open up feed markets far from home.

"The other market that we are very hopeful for is the overseas market. Parts of Southeast Asia, particularly Japan, Korea and Taiwan, would place a high value on the digestible fibre in the oat hulls. Most of the fibre that is available to them locally is of very poor quality. Ruminant animals need a good source of digestible fibre in addition to high energy for the production of milk and meat. We hope that this material provides both fibre and energy in one package that can be fed without a lot of processing," explained Rossnagel.

CDC SO- I has now been registered as a variety with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Pedigree seed growers began seed production in 2006, and commercial production should begin in 2009. When commercial production does begin, it will have been almost 10 years since the project began in 1999. However, that is still a much shorter process than normal: the research cycle was fast-tracked.

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Rather than developing field-ready varieties for animal testing, CDC plant breeders produced prototype breeding lines that had the desired nutritional traits. That allowed the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Animal and Poultry Science to do early testing with livestock to see if the researchers were on the right track.

The project also involved a unique partnership. Super Oats Canada, a producer-researcher consortium, provided $210,000 in funding for the project, and the Saskatchewan government provided $207,000 through the Agriculture Development Fund.

"Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food and the Crop Development Centre have a long history of working together. The success of this project highlights the benefits of drawing on additional resources and direction from industry and other university departments," said Agriculture and Food Minister Mark Wartman.

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BEEKEEPERS URGE CONSUMERS TO "BEE CANADIAN"

The Saskatchewan Beekeepers' Development Commission is stepping up its efforts to urge honey consumers to buy Canadian by urging them to read the fine print.

Commission President Tim Wendell says, often, it is not as simple as a quick glance at the label.

"We're concerned that consumers are opting to buy imported honey without realizing it," said Wendell. "We're urging consumers to stop and read the entire label before they make their purchase. Just because it says 'Canada Grade No. 1' on the front of the label, doesn't mean you're buying Canadian honey."

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is the federal regulatory agency that sets the standards.

"If a honey producer in another country meets that standard, the producer is allowed to say it is Canada Grade No. 1," explained Wendell. "However, if you look at the fine print on the back or the side, it indicates the country of origin, such as Australia or Argentina."

Pierre the Bear, a mascot developed by the Canadian Honey Council for a promotional campaign, recently made an appearance at Canadian Western Agribition on the beekeepers' behalf to promote the "Buy Canadian" campaign.

There are 130 commercial beekeepers in Saskatchewan with more than 100 colonies each. Saskatchewan is a leading producer of honey, accounting for almost 24 per cent of Canadian production in 2005. Figures are not yet available for this harvest, but anecdotal evidence suggests it was a good year.

"Our honey is produced from canola, alfalfa, sweet clovers and borage. Our honey is produced in a clean, pristine environment, free of heavy industry. Our climate and agricultural conditions, combined with beekeepers' management skills, result in Saskatchewan having the largest per capita honey production in Canada, and perhaps one of the highest in the world," explains Wendell.

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Wendell is also appealing to all other commodity organizations to support the beekeepers.

"We ask Saskatchewan farmers who grow grain or specialty crops or who raise livestock to support our efforts because we're part of the same agriculture industry," he said. "Remember: Bee Canadian, Eat Our Honey!"

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